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Cultural Appropriation and Subcultural Expression: The Dialectics of Cooptation and Resistance

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[For a decade or so it has been commonplace in academic presentations of film and video analysis to show clips (just as art historians show slides). It is now possible to store and retrieve articles with clips on the Internet and the World Wide Web. In a few years much scholarship of this kind will be electronically published, and student film and tv analysis "papers" will routinely include clips. ]

- Chuck Kleinhans

A lot of the people in cultural studies these days kind of remind me of the FBI in the fifties: They find subversion everywhere. --Greil Marcus.

The questions I want to examine are: how do subcultures appropriate from the dominant culture, particularly its mass culture, and how does that dominant mass culture in turn appropriate from subcultures?[1] Does such dual appropriation promote or undermine assimilation and/or identity? And, given that there are distinct power differentials between the consciousness industry and cultural expressions by subordinate groups, what kind of resistance is possible and effective? While a short essay cannot do justice to the complexity of all the issues involved, I can advance an argument for constructing further studies which can give the social and historical context for the processes. I should also note that inevitably this discussion connects with some issues well known in other frameworks such as the nature of the culture industry, issues of postmodernism, the relations of gender, race, and class in cultural analysis, identity politics, and activist media making.[2]

I've been involved with this matter of subcultures and appropriation for some time, starting in the 1960's while working in the underground press and the counterculture and seeing the subsequent changes in youth culture and the commercial music industry. So my experience is partly practical and historical, but it has also been critical and theoretical. In fact, for the most part, initially the critical questions were raised in the context of practical matters. Working on an underground newspaper and sympathetic to both sides, I had to balance the desires of the "politicos" for more news of protests and analysis of events against the expectations of the "freaks" and "hippies" for coverage of sex, drugs, and rock 'n' roll. Long meetings argued out decisions such as printing the John Lennon and Yoko Ono "Two Virgins" album photo and probably being banned from university distribution or even arrested for publishing full frontal nudity. Or, on

another occasion the question was, does a rock dance to benefit an anti-Vietnam war project somehow become "really political" when the accompanying light show includes slides of last week's demonstration on campus and last spring's March on Washington? The "politics of representation" had a decidedly pragmatic edge, and the results of decision could be immediately apparent.

To examine mass culture and the possibilities of creating oppositional cultural work, I've chosen two examples, one from the 19th century, and one from today, which dramatize this question in terms of issues of class, gender, and race. So this topic fits within the larger current terms of multiculturalism and "identity politics." As such this issue is rather hotly contested in cultural studies. What is the relation of subcultures to the dominant culture, particularly those subcultures which exist in a subordinate relation to the norm and which contain artists, intellectuals, and cultural workers of one kind or another who see themselves as working within a subculture and yet also trying to transform the boundary of that subculture and the values, framework, and active ideology of the dominant culture? Many of the issues that have been taken up in art of the past decade operate in such a framework: AIDS, censorship, women's rights, homelessness, racism, imperial war, gender identity, and sexuality, to name a few.

The currently contested question: is the special subculture response or reading, subversive of the existing order? In books such as *Television Culture*, *Reading the Popular*, and *Power Plays/Power Works* and in various articles, John Fiske stands at the front of those making the argument for subversive readings of mass culture, for the idea that consumers of mass culture have an active facility for resistance in reading mass culture texts. Fiske argues against traditional Marxist aesthetics, which simply endorsed high culture and regretted the workers didn't have access to it under capitalism, as well as against the Frankfurt School, especially Theodor W. Adorno as exemplified by the essay "The Culture Industry," which assumed that mass culture totally controlled the minds of the masses. By granting the audience almost complete autonomy to construct meaning, Fiske pushes an impulse to democratizing media reception about as far as it can go without becoming purely relativistic.

From within cultural studies, the argument that the audience determines the meaning has been criticized. For example Meaghan Morris observes,

...the thesis of cultural studies as Fiske and [Ian] Chambers present it runs perilously close to this kind of formulation: people in modern mediatized societies are complex and contradictory, mass cultural texts are complex and contradictory, therefore people using them produce complex and contradictory culture. To add that this popular culture has critical and resistant elements is tautological--unless one (or a predicated someone, that Other who needs to be told) has a concept of culture so rudimentary that it excludes criticism and resistance from the practice of everyday life. (24-25)

Morris is on target within the field of U.S. cultural studies.[3] But she does not take into account the rather entrenched status of the "audience as dupes" model dominant in the

work of (I assume liberal) Neil Postman and Mark Crispin Miller on television, or late Frankfurt School empiricism of George Gerbner, or the openly left models of Dallas Smythe and Herbert Schiller.

Very hostile criticism of Fiske's type of analysis also arises outside of cultural studies. A good example comes from media sociologist Todd Gitlin in a highly partisan essay:

Twenty years on, avant-garde shock has become routine, and avant-gardistes have to go farther and farther out to prove they haven't been taken in. Meanwhile, some of yesterday's outriders of youth culture have become theorists scavenging the clubs, back alleys, and video channels for a "resistance" they are convinced, a priori, must exist. Failing to find radical potential in the politics of parties or mass movements, they exalt "resistance" in subcultures, or, one step on, in popular styles, or even, to take it one step further--in the observation that viewers watch TV with any attitude other than devoted rapture. "Resistance"--meaning all sorts of grumbling, multiple interpretation, semiological inversion, pleasure, rage, friction, numbness, what have you--is accorded dignity, even glory, by stamping these not-so-great refusals with a vocabulary derived from life-threatening political work against fascism--as if the same concept should serve for the Chinese student uprising and cable TV grazing. Some have found the new theoretical grail in sitcoms, some in slash and cult movies, some in the pace of MTV, some in the long tracking shot, some in punk, some in pornography--and the list grows with the ingenuity. Hegelian to the core, this line of thought agrees that somewhere in the culture "the resistance" must exist. (Gitlin, 191)[4]

In a much more detailed and considered article, Michael Budd, Robert Entman, and Clay Steinman have critiqued what they call the "affirmative character" of cultural studies which ends up celebrating the status quo:

First, it overestimates the freedom of audiences in reception. Second, it minimizes the commodification of audiences as analyzed by a political-economic approach. Third, it fails to differentiate between mass advertising and specialized media. Fourth, it confuses active reception with political activity. Finally, it takes the exceptional situation of progressive readings promoted within oppositional subcultures as the norm. (169)

In this debate, I find some agreement with both sides. Certainly Fiske in particular is prone to overgeneralization from scanty data, seems unable to learn even from his friendly critics, and in his investigations of phenomena such as the Madonna fans and African American cultural practices has a tendency to become the Expert Explainer of Others.[5] At the same time, his work is motivated by a strong democratic impulse to account for otherwise unacknowledged, unstudied, or marginalized parts of the population, precisely those people overlooked by the grand overgeneralizations of both the empirical and critical traditions in mass communications research.

And in part Gitlin is right: one doesn't have to attend too many conference panels or read too many articles submitted for publication to find extreme claims about cultural subversion made with little effort to back up the critical insight with historical research, serious ethnographic analysis, confirmation from readily available empirical data, or some even a review of the pertinent literature. But it is not fair to judge the validity of an intellectual area by its worst examples. I wonder if Gitlin has really read the best. For example, he mentions celebration of slasher films, but the best study, Carol Clover's *Men, Women, and Chainsaws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film* is a reasoned attempt to explain why it is possible for some people, including women and feminists, to find pleasure in some of these films. Similarly, most of the feminists writing cultural analyses of pornography such as Linda Williams and Laura Kipnis are not celebrating it or claiming it is liberating. Rather they are trying to understand the complexities of the texts and the audience's responses. Gitlin and Budd, Entman, and Steinman carefully mention feminism in their essays, but seem unfamiliar with the major work in feminist cultural studies and oblivious to gay/lesbian/queer gender analysis and critics dealing with racial representation. I want to argue that both extremes of this debate fail to take into account the specifically dual nature of subcultural reading, that it exists as a dialectical process, and remains in many ways in tension rather than resolved in its very interpretation.

### The Cakewalk

While we might argue that the situation of powerlessness is not ironic to those who suffer it, we would also have to recognize that one of the ways that the oppressed have dealt with their situation is by themselves being ironic about it, by making jokes about it, in a protective and tendentious way. Take the example of the cakewalk, a processional dance originating in the ante-bellum plantation South of the U.S. Originally the cakewalk was a show arranged for the entertainment of the white masters. The black slaves were given cast-off clothing, finery unsuitable for their ordinary labor, and thus dressed up they proceeded to parade (often with a cake as the prize for the best couple or for the team when one plantation competed against another). From its origins, the cakewalk combined two different dance traditions: a shuffling processional as established in African tribal dances and the European derived grand parade introduction to a ball. Thus it was a fusion of a displaced folk dance and formally organized social dance. But as a show and contest dance, it invited stylization and exaggeration. For the masters there was considerable amusement in seeing the slaves in totally "inappropriate" clothing, making extreme gestures, acting as if they had the refined manners of the gentry. Yet for the slaves who participated, as hateful as this scorn might have been, the dance was also an opportunity to mock the masters' manners. Whites remained amused and superior, the controllers of a contest for a sugary treat, a kind of racist infantilization by the masters. At the same time, African Americans could spot the subversive ridicule involved. Everyone laughed, but one side laughed differently than the other.

After the Civil War the cakewalk, synchronized with African rhythms, continued in various forms including the minstrel and vaudeville show. It had earlier developed from a shuffle step to full fledged walk. Moved to the entertainment stage, its performers developed a highly articulated and exaggerated strut. (Although the cakewalk is no longer

a social dance, we can still witness this kind of theatricalized strut in the marching bands of historically black colleges and universities, and its virtuoso performance by the drum major.) The earliest moving images of the cakewalk are from a later period (around the turn of the century), presumably of professional cakewalkers, perhaps members of a minstrel show troupe, and they reveal the dancers' flamboyant energy. >From the visual evidence we can see how blacks ironically mocked the whites' fancy manners in a comic form which safely contained but certainly did not eliminate social criticism. [\[clip, Watch Me Move: 1:30\]](#)

Essentially contradictory, on one level the stage representation contributed to the racist myth of the happy plantation, and on another, it revealed the persistence of a critique within popular art forms. This genre should remind us that irony does not reside in the work; rather, it derives from a stance people take toward art. All works can be regarded ironically; though clearly some works invite an ironic stance more than others. And some parts of the mass audience are more prone to read against the grain than others.[6]

The reason we have images of the cakewalk in early film is due in large part to the post-Civil War theatricalized cakewalk becoming the first African American dance to cross over into national social dance. It also became an international dance craze, and in the 1890s some African American dance teams achieved national prominence for doing the cakewalk. Charles Johnson and Dora Dean became famous interpreters, followed by Bert Williams and George Walker who toured Europe and made it fashionable by teaching it to the Prince of Wales.

A later example of a cakewalk, this one from the 1943 Hollywood Black-cast musical *Stormy Weather* shows the industrial culture appropriation of a vernacular form.[7] To set the scene: Bill "Bojangles" Robinson has returned from World War 1 with other African American veterans. Still in uniform (a mark of patriotism and social levelling), they meet at a large dance hall in Harlem. Robinson dances with Lena Horne, and they are shown to be attracted to each other. Then a cakewalk begins, in typical Hollywood musical fantasy, with a huge dance chorus all out of proportion to what a club could afford, and then all join in. [\[clip: cakewalk Stormy Weather 2:40\]](#)

We can note several things here: the persistence of Hollywood and white culture stereotypes in the minstrel show aspects at the start, especially the women's dance chorus with blackface rag doll aspects to their costumes; but we can also note that everyone does join in and in terms of narrative development, the dance shows the community endorsement of the heterosexual couple. In contrast to many other falling-in-love musical dance numbers in Hollywood which isolate the dancers from society, here the Harlem community is a backdrop which allows the pair to form (as a couple) and perform (as entertainers).

Nostalgically recreating part of Black culture in Harlem after WW1, *Stormy Weather* had a rather obvious ideological function: it endorses Black participation in the war effort in 1943, as in 1919. This is no small thing, for we now know that some African American leaders privately made it very clear to the Roosevelt administration that they would support the war effort and accept the indignity of a Jim Crow armed forces only on the

expectation of military integration and expanded rights and opportunities after the war. And while, as viewers today we can easily critique certain aspects of this sequence as perpetuating Hollywood racism, we shouldn't ignore those aspects of the representation which refer to and endorse traditions of the African American community. For the white audience during World War II the cakewalk sequence provided an entertaining glimpse at exotic Others. For the African American audience, the sequence provided a reminder of a cultural heritage and an enactment of social ties and the presentation of heterosexual romance validated within a subcultural community.

Of course the original slave plantation cakewalk didn't change the fact of slavery, and of course it didn't overthrow it, but it did grant a group solidarity, a humor and bonding in the face of adversity and oppression, and this is no small thing. Such social bonding is the fertile ground of resistance. There is a tendency to dismiss such everyday forms of resistance to oppression. But to do so loses sight of the importance of small forms, the familiar expressions of consciousness. For example, feminist historians remind us that domestic space is a necessary precondition to events in public space. Domestic space provides the backstage for the public dramas.

## Voguing

I want to develop another example of cultural appropriation/reappropriation by presenting two cases of voguing. The success of Jennie Livingston's documentary film, *Paris Is Burning* (1991), on Black and Puerto Rican gay drag balls in New York City, assures that the background is widely known. Voguing began as a vernacular dance, with moves very similar to break dancing, around the late 60s within the context of black gay male culture in Harlem drag balls. It's a challenge dance, and as it evolved it took its name from the quotation of posing from fashion magazines, like *Vogue*, and runway fashion presentation. Like the cakewalk, vogue was danced in costume duplicating the dominant culture: typically in currently fashionable female clothing, but including categories for military uniforms, male business executives, etc. ([clip: Everybody Dance Now 4:10](#)) I think the points I was making earlier about appropriation are clear here: in the process of forging their own culture and identity, the femme and butch transvestites and transsexuals of this community take from the dominant. On the one hand, taking from the Other is something that males have always done in using drag. Here it is complicated again by having most of the imitation of the dominant wealthy white heterosexual world, blatantly inaccessible to the ball community. And significantly, there is an edge to this imitation, a containment and yet an expression of anger, even in the voguers stated desires to be rich, famous, and pass as conventional. On the other hand, it is easy to be suspicious of an activity which seems to celebrating values which are the opposite of these people's actual lives: Black and Puerto Rican, and homosexual, the working poor who sometimes or often living by street hustling, who sometimes steal to get designer label fashions for the balls.

This is a system built of contradictions, so if we're going to understand it, we will have to come to terms with all of them: those of race, those of gender, those of class. Black gay

writer Essex Hemphill in an analysis of *Paris Is Burning*, marked some of his own reservations. Quoting from another Black gay intellectual, Joseph Beams, he argued that: "style is an attitude" and that it is essentially reactive and defensive. As Beams put it:

The gay life is about affectation, but style is not imagemaking. Style, at best, is an attitude, a reaction to oppression, a way of being perceived as less oppressed, a way of feeling attractive when we are deemed unattractive. (Hemphill 111)

Hemphill recognizes that the Harlem balls involved the mocking and playing out the fashion show, and played with the matter of appearance-- or "realness"--since the contestants are evaluated highest when the trained as well as untutored eye cannot tell the difference between the illusion and the actuality. And yet Hemphill is also distinctly critical of a system which replicates, "the submissive and passive female identity constructed to oppress women vertically and horizontally. 'Femme Realness' condones the very things feminists have condemned and criticized about patriarchally constructed female identity." (Hemphill, 120). Hemphill critiques a resistance that is founded on materialistic, consumer, white terms. But he also recognizes that:

The erasure or silencing of identity through the use of illusion might be considered simply an act of entertainment in the context of the balls if it weren't such a willful act of survival and affirmation exercised in a state of increasing desperation. The yearning festering behind the illusions is a yearning for a full equality and a common privilege that the United States has yet to deliver... (121)

If we accept this analysis as valid for its base community, then how do we move on to the appropriation of voguing by commercial mass culture? Madonna's Vogue music video provides a perfect example. [\[clip: Madonna, Vogue, 5.00\]](#)

In what follows here, I am not primarily concerned with analyzing Madonna, who in any case, rest securely as one of the central commonplaces of cultural studies. I will simply note the obvious: Madonna's star image is postmodern; she is a clever businesswoman who understands the circulation of star images and celebrity; she knows how to press people's buttons to maintain her career. It's easy enough to mark the ways that her Vogue video abstracts a surface and style from Harlem ball culture. She has nothing to say back to the people from whom she appropriated (significantly, that appropriation removes the anger that suffuses the original), but in an important way she has much to say to the white middle class suburbs she herself came from. Ten years into the Reagan-Bush era, Express Yourself is an anthem for women's empowerment, Vogue (the video) lavishly expresses the physical beauty of African American men, Justify My Love (the video) celebrates polymorphous perversity in almost every adolescent's home: certainly some things that conventional politics wasn't able to do.

But this isn't enough for critics like Budd, Entman, and Steinman:

...we should not make too much of the significance of alternative readings. Women who find Madonna's image the sexual independence they admire may do so without actually altering their personal relationships with men, let alone joining feminist organizations. They may admire Madonna and still believe that patriarchal sex roles are natural, resolving internal conflicts in favor of the external forces they confront. If this were not so, we should see one subversive belief becoming linked to others, leading to visible confrontations with power, especially when subversive readings are as widely available as they are in the realm of feminism. (178)

But would these three critics really be happy with art that had the power to convert people to a political cause? This would be Goebbels' dream come true, or even better: instead of the hours it takes to view *Triumph of the Will*, a five minute music video recruits the unpoliticized to the cause. The issue is a rather old one in Western aesthetics, one that goes back to Plato banishing the poets from his Republic.

A far more pertinent critique of Madonna and Vogue centers on matters of racial representation. Hemphill notes that the video erases the source of voguing in Harlem drag ball culture, and he observes, "...the litany of names she calls in the song as representative of style and attitude deliberately excludes Blacks and Puerto Ricans...names like Josephine Baker, Dorothy Dandridge, and Celia Cruz are conspicuously absent from her list of the beautiful ones." (114) Hemphill is right about this selective appropriation, and yet while correctly getting the words of the music video, he completely misses a far more powerful point in the video, which is the immensely beautiful and physically expressive African American men who are lovingly presented and endorsed by the camera work, who dance with an astonishing skill. Like many literary and verbal culture intellectuals, on a verbal level Hemphill is correct, but on a visual and sensual level he missed the point. Some other critics have done better. In a rather searing discussion, African American critic bell hooks raised the rhetorical question, "Madonna: Plantation Mistress or Soul Sister?" and pursued the topic further in a study of Madonna's book, *Sex* (hooks, 1993). In considering the star, hooks manages to grasp both the appeal of Madonna's image of female empowerment, and the limits of her racial imagination which transgresses some boundaries only to endlessly return to validating her own whiteness.

I am interested in hooks' discussion because it belongs to evolving critical and theoretical analyses within cultural studies that take voguing, *Paris Is Burning*, Madonna's *Vogue* and other opportunities to discuss gender, race, and class together, all at once, as interrelated, and begin to lay out new ways of thinking that hopefully will help us move beyond the impasse seen the debate I described at the start of this paper. In other words, I don't think we're definitely beyond that debate, but I am encouraged by some newer tendencies which move on from its terms. For example, in "Elements of Vogue," Marcos Becquer and Jose Gatti argue against an essentializing discourse on vogue that interprets it as a hybrid and instead put forward the critical term syncretism which they interpret as always maintaining the fluidity and changeable nature of the phenomenon being studied. Similarly, Kobena Mercer's recent book of essays, *Welcome to the Jungle*, shows an interesting evolution in his thought on racial fetishization in visual arts starting with his



earlier strong negative evaluation of Robert Mapplethorpe's photography worked out with a reconsideration after the conservative attack on Mapplethorpe's work. In a somewhat different but related critical discussion of gender representation, positions have also evolved. Some extreme claims were made for "performing gender" in the recent past, such as Marjorie Garber's book length assertion that "transvestism is a space of possibility structuring and confounding culture: the disruptive element that intervenes, not just a category crisis of male and female, but the crisis of category itself." (17) Judith Butler answers this claim and others in *Bodies That Matter* with a discussion of *Paris Is Burning*.

...There is both a sense of defeat and a sense of insurrection to be had from the drag pageantry in *Paris Is Burning*, that the drag which is after all framed for us, filmed for us, is one which both appropriates and subverts racist, misogynist, and homophobic norms of oppression. How are we to account for this ambivalence? This is not first an appropriation and then a subversion. Sometimes it is both a once, sometimes it remains caught in an irresolvable tension, and sometimes a fatally unsubversive appropriation takes place. (128)

What then is the relation of subcultures to appropriation and reappropriation? At the risk of repeating the error of circular definition that Meaghan Morris describes, I think we must more fully consider the contradictions of both cultural texts and responses. The situation we study is one of flux and change. It can only be understood as one of context and relation. It is one that must include analysis of contingent factors. This can sound like academic cheerleading: "Tougher analysis! More complexity! More contradiction!" But the goal is to bring our theorizing closer to the complexity of actuality and to enact that theory, to embody it, to test it, in actual social practice.

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